Beautiful English

Rebecca Ruth Gould

DREICH CHAPBOOKS

Beautiful English

Rebecca Ruth Gould

Keine Sprache ist Muttersprache

"No language is the mother tongue."

Marina Tsvetaeva

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For Kayvan

Beautiful English

Your nineteenth century speech
is more contemporary to me
than the news cycle.

Its measured iambs palpitate
Shakespearian pentameters,
so abstracted is it from

the detritus of everyday life,
& so oblivious to the streets
I walk on

as I await your arrival
from Iran: your first entry
into my universe.

Then we can no longer pretend
to be divided by hemispheres
or rely on the civilizational clash

of East and West to explain how
our words cross borders without
reaching their destinations.

Your peculiar English
is a beautiful distortion
of familiar sounds,

bound together into knots
that roll softly on my tongue.
Every syllable punctures an illusion.

Your antiquated diction rouses me as
a constellation stirs the stars
in unexpected, opposing directions.

Your English is a survival skill:
disciplined & distant,
crafted as if to remind me:

Language is mastery.
Instead of speaking needlessly,
we should bite our tongues.

Every sentence manifests vigilance
& strips off the masks I use
to distance myself from you.

All my words
—all my Englishes—
lie exposed before you.

Meanwhile, you speak the veiled language of
Hafez & Sadi to your *mahram.*
Many secrets are kept from me.

Our civilizational gap
confines me to the outer edges
of your intimate galaxy.

This closure mirrors another division,
imposes another veil on your tongue,
as if our differences were the stuff of wars

& to speak would be treachery,
& the thing you placed in my hands
when I visited your homeland

was less a sign of our proximity than
a gift given to strangers,
passing through alien territory.

Tahdig

The non-stick pot sparked a revolution.
Suddenly, my kitchen was a shrine.
You maneuvered as if it were your home
& our limbs belonged to each other.

Your golden tahdig warmed my skin.
I wrap around my body
every night,
trying not to feel alone.

The crispy crust is traced with turmeric and saffron.
It covered my hands like henna
& spread onto my cheekbones.

Instead of speech,
we speak tahdig.
Our edible dialogue—
our government of the birds
in exile—
is a way of not being alone
in our homes.

no one is illegal
but some are hunted
some are wanted
some are always aliens wherever they go.

I would have roamed the world
to hitch my soul to your star.

I would have eaten anything
made with your hands,

even the bread broken by Jesus,
before he marched to Golgotha.

Some Things are Hopeless

Falling in love with the dawn.
Watching the bridge arc
over the water's surface,

completing the night's circuit.
Some things are like holding
hands with you in Tehran.

To such fates I can only bend.
Such events cannot be planned.
One must, rather,

build one's life around them,
hoping that the ancient gods
will keep faith with us.

The weight of a native language on the tongue;
The sweet infection of a child's grin;
The surprise of the beloved's kiss;
The softness of the rose

you placed in my hand
our first night in Tehran
that I clenched,

helplessly,
in my fist,
not knowing where
its touch
would lead us.

The imperative to love.
The need to make one's love a gift.
Some things are hopeless.

They submerge the will,
passively,
in wonderment.

Arches of Isfahan

When we recited poetry in Isfahan,
the Bridge of Thirty-Three Arcs
stretched to embrace the firmament.

The songs you brought to life
were meteorites, detonating
in the sockets of our eyes.

If time had been reversed,
the poet's tomb would have
been our pilgrimage.

Water would have flowed
from the Ziyandeh's shores,
& every point on the bridge

would have echoed
the sky's demand
for release from the earth.

But time had no time—
& eternity no purpose—
for our meandering.

So I took the book
you left for me,
without saying goodbye.

Small Town Tyranny

I.

Your persecution, my beloved, is a familiar song.
I read about it in the annals of the GULAG
& in the murders of Mandelstam,

Titsian, Paolo Iashvili, and Cholpon.
I witnessed it in the deaths of Mayakovsky,
Esenin, Tsvetaeva, and Galaktion.

It was foretold in the imprisonments of Gumilyov,
Zabalotsky, and Efron. It echoes in the silencing of
Pasternak and Akhmatova.

The lists of victims, my beloved, is long.
Resurrecting these dead poets
in the Islamic Republic of Iran

revives the executioner's threnody.
I fear losing you—the suffocation of our love—
beneath a veil of piety.

II.

It is not the monstrous “Islamic” fantasy
that scares me, but the trivial gossip
that spreads like cancer,

the petty rumours that circulate
from London to Tehran
& back again,

the formulaic recitations
of state-sponsored poetry,
the forced confessions broadcast live,

the threats against all lovers
who refuse to engage in treachery,
the gossipers spreading calumny.

Their whispers hum beneath every breath,
like flies buzzing around a corpse, then eating its flesh.
I fear your shisha-smoking interrogators,

who orchestrate their interrogations
more carefully than a romantic rendezvous.
They play with you to make you bend,

until you inform on yourself and betray your friends.
I know you won’t give in,
but what price will you pay to resist?

Past masters in the arts of fear,
their mercenary fingers bulge like the cockroaches
who punished Mandelstam for blaspheming Stalin.

III.

When they bug our rooms
& surveil our emails,
my love for you opens

like a Venus fly trap.
My lips grasp your kiss
before it vanishes in Tehran's polluted air.

Even when the state holds us in its grip,
the tenderness of your fingertips
lingers on my breast.

I fear what will happen
when you cross the threshold,
seeking refuge in the church of my body.

Will the sentries of sovereignty
unearth the shards of our intimacy
scavenged from our paper scraps—

I told you to burn them—
Will banishment
be our punishment?

Will the bureaucrats
use our love to proclaim the victory
of their provincial tyrannies,

just as they hang
dead bodies in the public square:
to terrify lovers everywhere?

Farewell to Iran, after Lermontov

Good-bye, corrupt Republic,
land that mixes revolution with sacred law.
And you, revolutionary guards,
And you, Iranian voters, drunk on dreams.

Perhaps, beyond the wall of Alborz,
I will hide from the ayatollah's eyes,
from his all-seeing secret cameras,
from the hacked computers and the wiretapped phones.

I will reinvent you in a distant country.
I will deterritorialize your geography.
I will inscribe a map of my homeland
onto my beloved's body.

On Leaving Iran

The plane ascends.
Women disrobe,
crossing into Turkey's airspace.

Their hair cascades like waterfalls.
I lift my skirt to let my legs breathe.
So much sin is compressed

between my teeth & my toes!
The wind caresses my hair.
The carpet's threads bend beneath my feet.

I am happy to unveil—
for myself, not a male guardian—
to return to my body,

to desire myself for myself,
in this corner
of the cockpit

poised between two countries,
without male eyes
watching over me.

Linebreak

Our lines break over us
like waves on the beach.
The eye's high tide
punctuates our every unsaid goodbye.

Our line breaks are suspended between our tongues' nativity.
The pearls of Ibn Hazm's necklace scatter
across English grasses.

Our line breaks
mold our bare bodies in each other's image.
Blind to our bind, our lines
position us on opposing sides of this divide.

Earth's pendulum encircles our breaking lines.
The moon milks
with the light of other galaxies.
Your red lines have been crossed.

You forded the Rubicon
only to discover it was a stream compared to the oceans
you would cross in migrating

to a language
—my language—
that your lines could not tame.

Our line breaks hang between us,
until the scaffolding collapses.
The bridge that held us up exposes its gaps.
The lines scatter like our nascent thoughts.

This is the difference between the way our lines
break each other's hearts:
for you the door's tapered whisper, closing,
is for me our love's perpetual opening.

.

Yerevan in Winter

As we hewed words from the stone tower,
the planets completed their orbit.
Ice cracked and froze.

Our glass walls gazed on the circus below.
Cars sailed through smog.
Buses creaked their way to work.

As we sat secluded in our icy fortress,
the firmaments lit the horizons
that translated our union into words.

I watched you stare into the abyss.
I watched the passage of
the lives we could have lived.

I watched our fates diverge,
and our shadows merge.
I watched the images

from our quarry twist and turn,
then melt like snowflakes
in the crisp morning snow.

Arab Spring in Berlin

I turned down the offer of a dowry
& we hitched a ride to the airport
at twilight from Damascus to Berlin,
to start a new life.

Syria started burning soon after we arrived.
First, the revolution in Egypt had to be televised.

Then, we made love on the balcony overlooking Tiergarten
while CNN live streamed the revolution.

I was full, dreaming of the castles we'd build.
Every light in the skyline was a votive candle
that overtook me with fear of pregnancy.

I feared that my hasty longing
had brought to the world new life.
Crimson trickles broke the terror—

I bled the everyday blood we (women) shed—
the reassurance that life continues
even when death prevails—
while the shahids are martyred on Tahrir Square.

When I waved goodbye to you in the U-Bahn,
the station's cement blending with the night,
I felt like those revolutionary fools who cast fear aside
because they believed that it was right,
opening their arms to the world.

Arabic Lessons

Your glasses broke on your way
to our first Arabic lesson

in Damascus. I found you wandering
through al-Salhiyeh blind,

near Ibn al-Arabi's tomb,
fording stones & broken glass,

looking for my door.
I did not understand your every word,

but your favorite authors translated.
You liked novelists best.

You did not talk politics, except
to tell me we were being watched.

At the first sign of violence,
I escaped to Berlin.

I called you every night.
Every night, the phone buzzed to silence.

I hope your glasses protect your eyes
from the glare of the sun—
from the bombs' incessant drum.

Grozny

The girl who invited me
to stay in her tent camp
so she could teach me Chechen
sat steadily in the corner,
fearing any motion
that might trigger an explosion.

Grozny's flats were levelled.
Dolls lay disembowelled on the floor.
Glass shards covered the earth.

The road's yellow ribbon rolled
like a carpet, lining my escape
route to Vladikavkaz.

The siren song of battle
trilled its endless, plaintive moan.
Contraband, listened to by everyone.

Stolen Limestone

Jerusalem limestone spreads
like an occupation over
the ancient city of Bethlehem.

Cats congregate along
dangerous intersections where
concrete walls break into homes.

Workers pass the dawn
behind the bars of checkpoint 300,
waiting to build settlers' homes

with stolen limestone.
Children must be fed.
Their hands are pressed against the bars.

Neither Palestinian nor
Israeli, I dwell in complicities
of routine hypocrisies.

Limestone shimmers
beneath the sun's glare,
wrapping the occupation

in the mirage of purity.
Others have suffered more,
but rarely has a state done so

stripped a people of dignity,
forcing them to live in the shadow
of another's people's atrocity.

Meanwhile, Palestinians
build bridges of broken memories
on captive, occupied territory.

Muslim Prayers

My udon noodles were longer,
thicker & probably tastier

than your beef tongue.
I never found out

because I forgot to eat,
as I often do when captivated

by someone.
I grasped the chopsticks

in my hand & watched
you check your watch

every five minutes.
You were working to a deadline.

There was something wrong—
yet also right—about being

together with you,
eating pan-Asian in St Pancras,

you telling me about your wife's
previous sex life & me

projecting my every thought
of you onto someone else—

so that our friendship would
never abandon its purpose—

& the Muslim formulas
that we repeated as infidels,

binding our heresies together.
'In sha' Allah. If God wills,

there will be mercy on us.
I thought about how

it would have been to be
a sibling to you, or a lover

or just a friend, unburdened
by expectations.

I thought about your wife too
& the strength of her will

& you reading stories
to your daughter every night in bed.

All this passed through my head
as you stood to pay the bill.

A life lived well flashed before me
& I just wanted to tell you:

Alhamdulillah.
As-Salamu Alaykum.

May God be praised.
May peace be upon you.

Restraint

In the Hungarian Pastry Shop,
lovers' favoured haunt,

your thumb grazes my fingers.
Your blue eyes linger. I don't resist.

As for the rest, I accept the limits:
children, wives, daily lives.

Coffee warms the fingers. Tiramisu teeters
on our plates like leaning towers of Pisa.

The crowd subsides.
Only dreamers haunt these nocturnes.

Although I long
for the touch of your lips,

I will not turn this moment
into a cliché

by feeding you tiramisu.
Instead, I will await the day

when age makes us sexless
& desire is a memory,

when thinking of you—
& thinking with you

—lingers longer than
the urge to kiss you.

Constellations

The cosmos is a Kaba
stretched against the sky,
stripped of signs.

The firmament echoes God
speaking to Muhammad,
dictating the Quran.

Back then, the sky was synchronized
to the cycles of time
& the Pleiades watched over us.

Back then, the Kaba circulated overhead.
Everything that happened on earth
was mirrored above.

God was undead.
The signs on the Kaba have ceased
speaking our tongue.

We are in prison, waiting
to hear our names.
We make up our languages as we go along.

Crosses Nailed to our Bones

You asked me to pray for you,
so I stood in front of a God
I renounced two decades ago
& lit a candle.

The coiled limbs of Christ crucified
snaked across Adam and Eve's garden.
Our love was poison's paradise.

The wounds of Christ's sacrifice oozed our blood.
The candle's flickering wick burned
like a beacon from another world.

Our Last Supper—the bread we did not break
together—arrived too early.
It was already too late.

Our paths zigzagged around each other like lost pilgrims.
The road to Golgotha is harsh and long.
It winds without mercy when crosses are nailed to our bones.

Woman in a Frame

Watching you watch
the woman framed
by her mirror

Reminds me of our love:
limned by international borders,
constrained by the world's laws,
barricaded by alien wars.

You lift the camera.
I spy her in the pixelated lens:
her shoulders unburdened
her waist wrapped in silk.
All she sees is herself.

Like us: wrapped in each other.
Trying to block invading armies,
keeping the world out.
The silences between us magnify
until I spy the parapets you have built
around our imagined fortress.

You wanted to keep our love small
& invisible.
Manageable, under control.
You wanted to frame me
in your mirror,
to keep our castle impregnable,
to prevent it from tumbling down.

I wanted to explode.

My Father's Photography

My father liked to photograph
the snippet—not the fullness—
of the instant. On weekends and holidays
we built archives in our basement.

Our darkroom chamber
became an alchemist's paradise.
Ammonia bleached dark film light.
His gloves were pulled tight.

My plastic-clad wrists were taped
so fluids wouldn't seep in
& damage my childhood skin.
I imitated his every movement.

When we finished, he lifted me
high. I danced like a ballerina,
climbing into the skies. The trouble came
when I grew up & stopped copying him.

His skin darkened into a sepia tint.
His fists clenched.
Question authority became my mantra
& I no longer admired him.

The negatives began exposing
what he didn't want to see.
As I approached adulthood,
my father stopped practicing photography.

He disappeared into unknown territory.
His art grew thin. His bones grew weary.
He sold his passport, became a non-citizen,
hid from the camera as if it might curse him.

I think he must be practicing necromancy—
splicing a partial truth, mixing in a fantasy
—blocking out every inconvenient reality—
in some foreign, mystical country.

The Girl Next to Me

Is me, minus a decade, probably two,
possibly three.
She sits hunched over a laptop
in the Watershed Cafe, writing frantically.

Two creamy strudel
pigtails cascade down her bare back,
covered by a seductive
skin-hugging black tank top.

Green and blue streaks
through her blonde hair
Her black satin choker
aggressively announces
her virile, sexual body.

Her pyramid earrings
declare her strength,
relish her beauty,
while renouncing femininity.

Don't fuck with me, her body says,
I love myself as I am.
I don't need a man to fawn on me.
I'm at home in my body.

Her plaid cardigan mocks the very idea of conformity.
Her silver Doc Martens
rebel against every man-made law.

But when the boy seated
At a nearby table walks across the cafe,
sits down beside her,
& begins to stroke her back,
her limbs bend
to his every caress.

When his hands graze
the nape of her neck,
she folds beneath the pressure like a Barbie.

The girl sitting next to me
thinks she's nobody's fool.
She is brave and tough.

Her rapture as she jams away
on the keyboard
makes me wonder whether our feminist
revolution has finally dawned
& a girl-woman is at one
with her body.

Her sweet I don't give a fuck grin
when the barista
asks if she wants more coffee—
evoking mysterious freedoms.

But the way she bends
to the boy's hand, her tremors
as he glides across her shoulders—
as if she belonged to him—
& all that mattered was his desire for her—
as if her butterfly skin
was crushed in the palm of his hand—
makes me wonder.

Acknowledgements

"*Tahdig*," first appeared in *The Windsor Review* 53. 2(2021): 6.
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"Small Town Tyranny," first appeared in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry* (Poets Resist, 2019).
"Farewell to Iran, after Lermontov" first appeared in my short story "How to be a Migrant," *Mumber Mag* (2020).

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Reimagining the English language from the point of view of Persian and other languages that Gould has translated from, *Beautiful English* defamiliarizes familiar poetic forms in order to move away from the notion of one correct English. The poems turn to the cultures and histories of Iran, Palestine, Syria, Chechnya, and Armenia to grapple with new ways of defining the self through language and in its encounter with others. Poems from this collection have appeared in *Oxford Poetry, Poetry New Zealand,* and *Another Chicago Magazine*. Read more about Gould and her work at https://rrgould.hcommons.org/poetry . She can be found on Twitter and Medium @rrgould.

"These beautifully articulated pieces come to me as elegies, their sustained poignance pronounced in a language that transcends the very walls around which they seemed to have been crafted... [The poems are] hung up like frescoes made from stolen limestone in the manner of Palestinian workers waiting out the dawn so they could build to perpetuate their own occupation. The language employed in the poems is the language of longing that follows different patterns in breaking lines. I was touched by how much the narrator sees as well as by how much is held back."

-- Sabyasachi (Sachi) Nag, author of *Bloodlines* (2006) and *Could You Please, Please Stop Singing?* (2016)

"In these scrupulously observed yet passionate poems, Rebecca Ruth Gould demonstrates how love—self-possessed and stubborn—transcends the bounds of language, culture and state repression. Gould is a real poet and a real find. Cogent and memorable, her poems have a rare power to move the reader."

-- David Cooke, *The High Window*

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